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THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS AND THE RELIGIOUS SIMBOLISM OF THE MEDIEVAL BESTIARY

OS SETE PECADOS CAPITAIS E O SIMBOLISMO RELIGIOSO DO BESTIÁRIO MEDIEVAL

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Abstract: The natural world, with its vast spaces and diverse creatures, emerged as a reliable source of teachings aimed at spiritual growth and the salvation of the soul within the context of the Christian faith. This symbolic dimension, often influenced by ideological conditioning, adds depth to the understanding of the relationship between nature and spirituality. With this in mind, the study delves into the captivating world of animals from the medieval bestiary, highlighting their symbolic connection to vices or violations of religious morals, known as the Seven Deadly Sins. This exploration reveals a fascinating aspect of medieval Christian doctrine that continues to hold significance within the framework of religious belief today.

Palavras-chave: Animais, bestiário medieval, Simbolismo, ideologia, os Sete Pecados Capitais

Resumo: O mundo natural, com seus vastos espaços e diversas criaturas, emergiu como fonte confiável de ensinamentos voltados ao crescimento espiritual e à salvação da alma no contexto da fé cristã. Esta dimensão simbólica, muitas vezes influenciada por condicionamentos ideológicos, acrescenta profundidade à compreensão da relação entre natureza e espiritualidade. Pensando nisso, o estudo investiga o cativante mundo dos animais do bestiário medieval, destacando sua ligação simbólica com vícios ou violações da moral religiosa, conhecidos como os Sete Pecados Capitais. Esta exploração revela um aspecto fascinante da doutrina cristã medieval que continua a ter significado no quadro hodiernos da crença religiosa.

Keywords: Animals, medieval bestiary, symbolism, ideology, Seven Capital Sins.

Introduction

The Seven Deadly Sins or Capital Sins in the Middle Ages

These sins, a pivotal construction of the Christian doctrine, are far more than a mere compilation of transgressions as known nowadays. They carry a profound and enduring

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history, as ancient as Christianity itself. In the 6th century, Pope Gregory the Great, guided by the Epistles of Saint Paul, proposed and identified them as the primary vices of human behavior in his Moralia, sive Expositio in Job (Moralia in Job). However, it was not until the 13th century that the Catholic Church officially recognized the pontiff's list, now enriched by the contributions of the esteemed Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in his Summa Theologiae, Questions VIII-XV of Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo (On Evil).

Fig. 1 - The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things of Man (c.1505-1510). Oil painting by Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450-1516). Prado Museum. Madrid. The painting is attributed to the Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450 – 1516). It is Composed of four circles at the ends representing, through everyday scenes, the Last Things of Man's life: death, judgment, paradise and hell; and the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, envy, greed, anger, lust, gluttony and sloth.

In this work, the Saint explores the historical and fundamental nature of the Seven Sins in a comprehensive manner, making a clear distinction between them and the minor sins. He drew inspiration from the timeless teachings of Aristotle, Saint Augustine, and Averroes to develop his theory of habitus, a concept that highlights the human inclination towards virtues (good) or vices (evil). This perspective elevates vices to the level of sins based on their severity.

The term 'Capital,' signifying the most severe sins, is derived from the Latin word caput, which means head, leader, or chief. Thus, Capital Sins have since come to be considered the most faulty transgressions committed by sinners, as they lead to other minor faults.

The struggle against vices to uphold virtues, a central theme in the Middle Ages, was deeply rooted in Western culture long before it was adapted by the Christian Church (Vincent-Cassy, 2000, p. 1511). Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (384- 322 BC) delved into the virtues with meticulous detail. The dialectical concept of virtues versus vices also found expression in the Stoic Couplets by Cato (234-149 BC), which were translated into several vernacular languages, including classical Norse. These couplets encapsulated a set of well-defined ideas, often quantified, about the nature of good and evil, further enriching the historical tapestry of this concept.

During the medieval period, the Catholic Church played a significant role in establishing a set of virtues and vices that were considered essential for guiding moral behavior. These virtues, such as prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, were promoted as qualities to be upheld. Conversely, vices such as greed, envy, pride, and wrath were discouraged and considered detrimental to one's spiritual well-being. Over time, these concepts of virtues and vices became intertwined with the Church's understanding of sin, influencing the development of moral theology and shaping the religious and ethical framework of the time.

In the Gregorian adjustments to this list, the most notable concept of his proposed model was the idea of a 'super vice,' a sin like pride, which was considered more severe than all others and could generate and sustain other sins (Casagrande; Vecchio, 2003, p. 280-281). In Isaiah 14, a powerful prince, Helel-ben- Shahar, the morning star, is mentioned as being cast down from the heavens due to his excessive pride. This figure, associated with the cherub depicted in Ezekiel, and both connected to Satan, the prince of the earthly realm and a formidable adversary to God's world, underscores the religious implications of that super vice (Russell, 1984, p. 11).

During the Middle Ages, the concept and existence of sins, deeply intertwined with religious beliefs, had a profound impact on the lives of both men and women. It was not just a societal construct, but a deeply personal one. The concept of sin not only significantly altered

their perception of time, organization of space, understanding of anthropology, and pursuit of knowledge, but also shaped their ideas about work, connections with God, and the construction of social relationships. Men's ritual practices and worldview were not just influenced, but deeply intertwined with the presence of sin (Casagrande; Vecchio, 2002, p. 337). The concept of sin held a central place in the medieval worldview, serving as the cornerstone of its moral framework that was deeply rooted in religious beliefs (Erickson, 1975, p. 27).

In the medieval period, sin was not just a part of people's lives; it was the very fabric of their existence. It was intricately woven into the complex tapestry of relationships that governed them, a constant presence that could not be escaped. People were guided by a God who both forbade and forgave sins, a figure of immense power and authority. On the other hand, the Devil loomed as a constant, malevolent presence, ceaselessly tempting and seducing them. The community men were part of was predominantly composed of sinners, each person a testament to the pervasive nature of sin. The manifold forms of sin were symbolized by vivid depictions of real or mythical creatures in treatises, church images, sermons, and paintings (fig. 1). As time advanced, the Devil's influence was further accentuated by the emergence of foul and contagious diseases, a direct result of the world's sins (Casagrande; Vecchio, 2002, p. 337-339). In this amazing scenario, the bestiary was a prevalent expression of this particular worldview.

The Medieval Bestiary

The fascination with the natural world has been a constant source of inspiration for humanity across various fields of interest. In Western civilization, influential figures such as Herodotus (5th century BC) with his Histories, Aristotle (384-322 BC) with History of Animals, and Pliny (23-79 BC) with Natural History exemplify this enduring human curiosity. It is important to emphasize that this interest extended beyond erudite and scientific perspectives; it was deeply intertwined with religious practices, significantly influencing people's knowledge and their daily lives and belief systems.

During the Middle Ages, the natural history writings from classical antiquity significantly shaped the Christian perspective. This influence is particularly evident in the

bestiaries and other sources of the time, where Christian ideology played a dominant role in adapting and 'Christianizing' the pagan elements present in these sources. This process involved incorporating Christian interpretations and moral teachings into existing knowledge about the natural world, thereby transforming the understanding of nature within the context of Christian belief (Varandas, passim, 2006).

People of the Midde Ages had a complex relationship with animals. Animals were part of everyday life, both in the wild and in domestic settings. This coexistence led to a mix of ordinary and fantastical encounters, including mythical creatures and symbolic beings. As a result, animals were often used as symbols in religious stories, political jokes, and moral lessons due to their rich symbolic meanings.

People had a multifaceted relationship with animals. Animals were an integral part of daily life, existing in both the untamed wilderness and domestic environments. This coexistence resulted in a diverse range of encounters, encompassing both mundane and extraordinary experiences, including encounters with mythical creatures and symbolic entities (Hassig, 2000, p. xi).

The medieval bestiary, a compendium of beasts and creatures, serves as a testament to the profound interest of medieval culture in natural world. In this sense, the bestiary depicted real animals, but also showed an intense fascination with mythical creatures. Either real or imaginary, the animals in the bestiary acquired a deep symbolic and metaphysical significance, expressing strong spiritual responses underscoring its immense cultural and religious importance. The bestiary was viewed as a marvel, with the first marvel being the awe-inspiring Creation, seen as a profound gift from the Christian God to humanity.

The bestiary held a significant role as an educational tool within religious education. It was not only a piece of literature but also a widely popular and extensively used resource. Serving as a catechetical treatise, it focused on spiritual teachings rather than scientific facts, making it the most widely copied and read book of its time. This unique text meticulously detailed a diverse range of animals, both real and mythical, highlighting their natural and supernatural symbolism. Originally attributed to the author known as 'Physiologus', meaning 'The Naturalist' in Greek, it later became known as 'Bestiary' or 'Book of Animals.' The primary

goal of the clerics who anonymously produced it was to provide religious instruction, with each animal description intended to convey a devout lesson.

The medieval bestiary, as scholars have observed, has a moral character deeply intertwined with Christianity. In his insightful analysis, Jeremy Cohen illuminates the bestiary's anatomy and function, highlighting its dual purpose. Cohen's argument is compelling: the bestiary not only records the natural world but also seeks to understand it, thereby unveiling the intentions of its Creator. He posits that the bestiary's true objective is to serve as both a record and a guide, enlightening and leading sinful humans towards salvation (1989, p. 224).

In His divine act, the Creator brought animals, birds, and fish, each with unique natures and habits. This intricate design allowed the sinner to perceive a reflection of the human world within the kingdom of nature and provided a guiding light toward redemption. Nature, in its diverse examples, became a source of guidance and instruction for the sinner's path to salvation. Each creature then became a moral entity, carrying a profound message for the human reader (Barber, 1993, p. 7).

The concept of edifying instruction from nature as divine creation resonated deeply with the prevailing belief in the Christian West that the so-called ‘book of nature’ had been meticulously arranged by God to serve as a rich source of instruction for humanity. This concept of nature as a 'book of instruction' was not just a metaphor, but a profound truth that guided the faithful in their journey towards salvation. The biblical text itself already prescribed to man:

Ask the animals and they will instruct you. Ask the reptiles on the ground, they will teach you lessons. The fish in the sea will tell you all this. Among all these beings, who does not know that it was the hand of Yahweh that did all this? In his hands is the life of all living and the breath of every human being (Jó12: 7-10; translation mine).

The origin and spread of the bestiary are intricate and complex. While this article won't explore that in detail, it is important to make some final remarks. The genre, which lacks a specific author, demonstrates the collaborative nature of scholarly work. It is like a naturalist's

notebook that grew over time with contributions from various sources. Its roots can be traced back to the distant historical and mythological past, before it evolved into Physiologus, its immediate predecessor (White, 1960, p. 231).

The Physiologus, a foundational work in the bestiary genre, was originally written in Greek and likely dates back to the second century AD. It emerged from the dynamic Christian circles of Alexandria, a bustling intellectual center in the early post-Christ era. The scholars of this time, including Origen and Clement of Alexandria, were renowned for their allegorical interpretation of Scripture. They saw nature and animals as divine creations, each revealing a facet of God's power and wisdom. The Physiologus, with its profound theological content, was a testament to this perspective and a significant part of this historical context (van Woensel, 2001, p. 23).

The medieval bestiary, a genre that reached its peak between the 12th and 13th centuries, was heavily influenced by the ideological foundations of the Church. This influence was so strong that it might have even shaped the methodological and scientific rigor of the natural histories that inspired it. In fact, it can be seen as a product of the dominant religious culture of the Middle Ages, scholasticism, which was a true Christianization of the classical antiquity culture.

The Seven Deadly or Capital Sins in the Medieval Bestiary

In the Middle Ages, bestiaries were more than just collections of animals. They were platforms for allegorical interpretations. Each animal was assigned specific values, not chosen at random. Instead, certain creatures were believed to embody different capital sins, with their characteristics seen as either virtuous or sinful. The allegorical meanings of these animals were carefully developed and intricately woven into the text alongside images or illuminations. This interaction between written descriptions and visual representations was not passive, but a dynamic aspect that emphasized the active and significant role of animals in medieval allegory (Hassig, 2000, p. 54).

This section of the article will explore the symbolism of the Seven Sins departing from the Aberdeen Bestiary, a manuscript written and illuminated around 1200. The edition and translation of the Bestiary of Cambridge, a Latin bestiary from the 12th century by T. H. White,

as well other sources, will also provide information about the chosen animals. The medieval bestiary, a fantastic collection of illuminated animals, is notable for its depiction of various animals symbolizing specific sins or virtues. It often portrays the same sin being associated with multiple animals, and conversely, multiple sins being attributed to a single animal. This approach results in a rich tapestry of interpretations, reflecting the creative and complex meanings ascribed to animals in medieval culture.

According to the revision of Gregory the Great's classification, made by Saint Thomas Aquinas in his Summa Theologiae in 1273, the capital sins were redefined in the following septenary order: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust. When discussing the animal's sins in this article, a single animal was chosen as an example from the Aberdeen Bestiary, sometimes being other animals supplementarily added from other sources.

The Sin of Pride: the Tigress (Tigris)

Gregory the Great's list asserts that pride or vainglory is the chief of all sins, the very seed from which all sinful behavior sprouts. This sin is embodied by several creatures throughout the bestiary showing the importance of this vice. The bestiary, in its exploration of the perils of pride or vanity, weaves a captivating tale around the tigress's pivotal symbolism (Hassig, 2000, p. 55).

A tigress finds herself in a heart-wrenching situation when a cunning thief steals one of her precious cubs. Fueled by determination, the tigress embarks on a relentless pursuit of the thief. Despite the thief's attempts to outrun her on horseback, the tigress's incredible speed keeps her hot on his trail. To impede the tigress, the crafty thief utilizes a clever tactic. As the tigress draws near, he hurls a glass ball or mirror, causing the tigress to see her own reflection and mistake it for her cub, leading her to a hypnotic state. Believing she has rescued her cub, the tigress slows down, providing the thief with an opportunity to escape. The thief repeats this deceitful ploy, and the tigress eventually sees through the ruse and resumes her pursuit. Once more, the thief uses the glass ball to delay the tigress, leaving her to tend to the illusion of her cub. In the end, the tigress tragically loses her cub and the chance to seek retribution against the thief (Aberdeen Bestiary, fols. 8r, 8v). In medieval stories, the tigress represented a

conflict, as she struggles between her maternal instincts and her vanity which considered a sin of the feminine order (Hassig, 2000, p. 56-61).

The Sin of Envy: the Dog (Canis), the Partridge (Perdix) the Wolf (Lupus), the Fox (Vulpis)

In the bestiary, the connections between sins are often depicted through the behaviors of specific animals. One example is the illustration of the Sin of Lust and the Sin of Envy through the actions of the partridge. The Bestiary of Cambridge vividly brings this connection to life by illustrating the seemingly innocent yet paradoxically perverse behavior of the female partridge. This behavior involves snatching the freshly laid eggs of another female of her species and raising them as her own, which is seen as a clear manifestation of envy and greed (White, 1960, p. 136).

The Aberdeen Bestiary does not directly mention an animal associated with envy, but the tradition links this sin to the dog, particularly the greyhound. This is because dogs are known to fight over food, unable to tolerate another dog having a bone, which was seen as a manifestation of pure envy. Envy also had a strong connection to reptilians, such as the snake that, according to some, used envy and jealousy to make Eve eat the forbidden fruit.

The Sin of Wrath: the Leopard (Pardo), the Lion (Leo)

The Aberdeen Bestiary vividly portrays the Sin of Wrath through the depiction of ferocious animals such as the leopard and the lion. The bestiary provides a detailed description of the leopard, highlighting its insatiable thirst for blood, exceptional speed, and merciless nature in its attacks. The leopard's violent behavior, characterized by intense natural anger and a desire to annihilate its prey, is a direct representation of the Sin of Wrath. Additionally, the text mentions the consequences of the leopard's unbridled lust, including the creation of hybrid offspring through mating with lionesses. Despite its virtuous symbolism of a Christological nature, the lion also embodies the Sin of Wrath due to its fierce and aggressive nature. However, this is balanced by its role as a symbol of Christ's power and authority, demonstrating the complexity of symbols in the medieval worldview. These apparent contradictions form a perfect harmonic chorus, illustrating the intricate designs of divine omniscience. The lion, despite its fierceness, also serves as a symbol of anger management,

teaching to control one's emotions. According to experts, lions only get angry when provoked (Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 7r, 7v, 8r).

The Sin of Sloth: the Owl (Noctua), the Ibis (Ibis)

The Sin of Sloth finds a perfect example in the figure of the owl in the bestiary. The owl, due to its nocturnal habits and its presence in sinister spaces, is associated with the dead in the bestiary. This bird's plumage is so heavy that it seems to be constantly forced downwards, representing the profound moral weight of the Sin of Laziness. The bestiary emphasizes the owl's depicting it as a creature weighed down by its own inaction, making it incapable and lifeless (Aberdeen Bestiary fol. 51r).

Similarly, the ibis is an example of laziness in the bestiary. This is due to its repulsive and slothful behavior. The bird typically perches at the water's edge and waits for putrefied fish to serve as its meal, showing no interest in swimming or learning. This laziness has led the ibis to become one of the most unsanitary creatures in the bestiary. (Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 47r).

The Sin of Greed: the Dog (Canis)

To represent the Sin of Greed conferred in the dog, the bestiary presents the following narrative: When a dog is swimming across a river while holding meat in its mouth, if it sees its own reflection on the water, it will drop the meat it is carrying while trying to get the meat it sees in the reflection. This dog's behavior is similar to the fool people who give up what they already have for the illusion presented by greed losing what they have without gaining what they desire (Aberdeen Bestiary, fols. 18r, 18v, 19r, 19v, 20r, 20v).

The Sin of Gluttony: the Dog (Canis), the Wolf (Lupus)

The Sin of Gluttony is indirectly associated with the figure of the dog due to the fact that this animal only looses its moderation when faced with much food it likes. Just as the dog is said to be moderated in its ways, a person in a position of authority diligently studies wisdom and must avoid drunkenness and gluttony in every way, as many people perished due to excessive food consumption. This comment summarizes the perception of gluttons as excessively indulgent and wasteful. Additionally, various other animals were also regarded

as symbols of gluttony. For example, the wolf was viewed as a ravenous devourer, reflecting the notion of excessive consumption (Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 16v).

The Sin of Lust: The Partridge (Perdix), the Goat (Caper), the Snake (Serpens)

The partridge is also referenced in bestiaries as a prime example of lust due to its highly promiscuous behavior. The anonymous author of the Aberdeen Bestiary portrays the partridge as a clever bird, using its cunning for malicious purposes.

Driven by uncontrolled lust, the males of this species climb on top of each other to copulate, ignoring all natural laws. When they fight each other for a partner, they believe they can use the loser of the fight as a sexual object, instead of a female. The partridge is a bird that is always tired due to its intense sexual activity, its lust being so overwhelming that, if the wind blows the male's odor towards a female, she will become pregnant by the simple contact with the smell (Aberdeen Bestiary, fols. 54r, 54v).

The Aberdeen Bestiary likens the goat to the partridge, describing it as an animal known for its excessive sexual desire and impudent behavior. It always seems ready to engage in sexual activities. The pressure of sex is so intense on its body that it is unable to look straight ahead, and its eyes are always turned to the side. The goat is always in heat, and its blood heats up to such an extent that it can dissolve a diamond (Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 21v). The goat, be it female or male, was perceived as a symbol of an excessive and aggressive sexual strength, which can only lead to a brutal copulation or frustration of the desires.

Final considerations

Bearing the conclusion that nature and its beings in the Middle Ages were a forest of symbols proposed by the Christian ideals and believes of the time, the medieval bestiary amazingly fulfilled its goal by investing animals presenting the capital sins established by the Church, whose representative enumeration goes beyond the limits of this study.

While the sins are not explicitly named in the bestiary, the nature and animals' behaviors served as figurative representations of men's vices. These sinful traits are evident in both the illustrations and text throughout the manuscript, serving as a constant reminder of the

presence of sin in the world. The animals depicted in the bestiary carry profound moralistic symbolism, aiming to influence human behavior towards sin or virtue.

Especially in the spiritual realm, the medieval bestiary with its moralizing beasts and stories exerted a profound influence on the religious life of the Middle Ages. This influence was manifested through its dual role of providing spiritual devotion and moral instruction. The bestiary not only served as a source of religious contemplation and reflection, but also functioned as a tool for teaching and instilling religious doctrine and principles. It was beautiful and meticulously crafted as instructional guides or manuals, incorporating a rich tapestry of allegories and symbols that held immense power and fascination. These symbolic elements played a crucial role in educating not only novices but also individuals who underwent conversion to the Christian faith later in their lives.

Finally, the exploration of the bestiary's moralistic and religious aspects offers a fascinating insight into the complex interplay of gender dynamics. It intriguingly amplifies feminine characteristics within its animal classifications, prompting a closer examination of the potential religious misogyny it inherits. This deliberate emphasis, like many others, not only underscores the bestiary's historical and social significance as a cultural artifact but also sparks a thought-provoking discussion on its potential biases.

Glossary

The Seven Deadly Sins, also known as the Seven Capital Sins, form a catalog of vices that are believed to corrupt the human soul and lead to immoral actions. After much theological debate about the genesis and typological ordering of sins, the following list was established reaching contemporary times.

Pride (Lat. vanitas)

Pride or vanitas ride is a sin linked to excessive arrogance and vainglory. It is considered such a grave sin that it was given special theological attention beyond the usual sins. The Church grouped vanity and pride together, believing that both contained elements of vainglory, justifying their combined treatment.

Envy (Lat. invidia)

Envy is often regarded as a sin due to the detrimental effects it can have on an individual's spiritual and emotional well-being. When one becomes envious, he tends to overlook his own blessings and instead fixes on another individual's possessions, status, and achievements. This can lead to an excessive desire to attain what the other person has, while neglecting their own personal growth and development. Consequently, envy can hinder one's spiritual journey and overall sense of contentment.

Wrath (Lat. ira)

The term 'anger' refers to a strong, intense, and uncontrolled emotion characterized by feelings of hatred, resentment, and a possible desire for revenge.

Laziness (Lat. prigritia)

A state of being characterized by a lack of care, commitment, negligence, sloppiness, slowness, and sluggishness that often leads to marked inactivity. It can be caused by physical or mental factors and is commonly associated with idleness and vagrancy in the context of work.

Avarice (Lat. avaritia)

The term 'avarice' refers to an excessive and uncontrolled attachment to material goods and money, placing them at the forefront of one's priorities. In the Christian belief system, avarice is viewed as a form of idolatry, as the individual who is consumed by avarice essentially worships material possessions, prioritizing them over everything else. This behavior is akin to the act of deifying material goods, elevating them to a status of utmost importance and reverence.

Gluttony (Lat. gula)

Gluttony is the excessive and insatiable desire for food or drink, surpassing what is necessary for sustenance. This sin is rooted in human selfishness, reflecting an unending pursuit of more and an inability to find contentment with what one already possesses.

Gluttony embodies a form of greed, perpetuating a cycle of consumption driven by an insatiable hunger for more.

Lust (Lat. Luxuriae)

Lust refers to the intense and selfish craving for sensual and material gratification. This encompasses an attachment to carnal pleasures, the erosion of traditional moral standards, excessive sexual behavior, lewdness, and an overall preoccupation with sensory indulgence.

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